

THE FORCE

by Renata Hopkins



It was a perfect day. As Mum and Dad unpacked the picnic stuff from the car, Harper heard a loud whoop from the direction of the bridge. Seconds later came the heavy splash of a human cannonball hitting the deep water below. The jumping had begun.

“Hear that, Harp?” Max hopped excitedly from foot to foot.

“We should go straight to the bridge.”

“Nah, I’d rather have a swim first.”

“The longer you wait, the harder it’ll be.”

“Max!” Dad said. “Harper can make up his own mind. And you need to wait till I’ve checked it’s safe where you’re jumping.”

“But he said he wanted to jump this year.” Max turned to Harper.

“You said you wanted to, right?”

“I said I’d try.”

Max cupped his hands on either side of his head, making two pointy ears.

“Do or do not. There is no try,” he said in a croaky Yoda voice.

Do or do not. Easy for Yoda to say. He was a Jedi master. It was also easy for Max to say – he’d been jumping off the bridge for three years. Two weeks ago, on his tenth birthday, Harper had told himself he would definitely jump this year. But what if he couldn’t do it?

Harper looked from Max to Dad and back to Max.

“Feel the force,” Max intoned. Harper felt only fear, but he knew that his brother was right. The longer he waited, the harder it would get.

“OK, I’ll do it,” Harper said. *There is no try.*

The wooden footbridge joined the picnic area on one side of the river to the tracks on the other. A few metres below, the blue-green water was so clear you could see right to the bottom. Already, kids were crowded at the handrail, waiting their turn.

Harper watched as a teenager in baggy, wet boardies climbed over the railing to stand on one of the struts. The boy didn’t hesitate – he simply stepped into space. One by one, the other kids followed. Some looked relaxed. Others screeched and yelled, circling their arms like windmills. But no one chickened out.

“Go on,” said Max, prodding Harper. “We’ve been here ten minutes already.”

Do or do not, Harper thought. But he shook his head. “That guy’s next.”





A boy with sunburnt shoulders climbed shakily through the railing. Balanced on the strut, he froze, staring down at the river.

An older kid stepped forward – a brother or cousin by the look of him. “Get on with it, Van,” he commanded.

The sunburnt boy bent into a knock-kneed crouch. Long seconds ticked by. Some of the kids looked sympathetic, others impatient. Pushy Kid rolled his eyes. “Maybe he needs a hand.” He stepped forward, ready to shove.

“Don’t,” said Harper, grabbing Pushy Kid’s arm. “He doesn’t have to do it.” The other boy seized his chance to scramble back to safety. He shot Harper a grateful look before running off down the bridge.

“You’re such a girl,” Pushy Kid shouted after him.

A girl in neon yellow turned on him. Her freckly face was fierce. “A what?” she demanded. She put a hand up to her ear. “Say that again.”

Pushy Kid smirked but kept his mouth shut.

“I’m a girl,” Neon Yellow declared. “Like, I am *such* a girl.” She moved to the side of the bridge, but instead of bending through the railing, she climbed up to balance on top. There was an impressed silence as she swivelled to face the crowd. She grinned, then jumped off ... backwards

There was a roar of approval. Kids clapped and shouted. Some boasted they were going to try that next. In the midst of all the noise, Harper felt suddenly certain that he couldn’t jump. Not forwards, not backwards – not at all. As Pushy Kid walked off towards the car park, Harper made his own getaway in the other direction.

“Hey!” Max called. “Where are you going?”

Harper gestured in the vague direction of the toilets. Max looked annoyed but didn’t follow.

The noise of the bridge jumpers grew gradually fainter. It was cool and peaceful among the trees, and the complicated knot in Harper’s stomach loosened. He started up the slope towards the toilets.

“I sense much fear in you,” said a croaky voice.

Harper jerked to a halt. He blinked. A familiar wrinkled creature sat at the edge of the path. He wore a faded orange sunhat, along with his usual dust-coloured robes, and was watching Harper with an amused expression.

“Yoda!” Harper blurted.

The Jedi master wiggled his ears. They were a bit squashed by his hat. “Know me, you do,” Yoda replied. “Hmmm?”

Harper screwed his eyes shut. When he opened them, Yoda was still there. This wasn't happening.

Yoda turned to look at the toilet block behind him. "Loo? Or loo not?" He giggled at his own joke.

Harper swallowed. "Actually, I don't need to go. It was just an excuse to get off the bridge and not jump."

"Then face your fears, you must," said Yoda.

"I tried, but my fears won! I'm not ready."

"Hmmmph! If waiting until ready you are, waiting a long time you will be."

Harper had to think hard about this confusing sentence. "Why do you always talk back to front?" he asked.

Yoda waved a three-fingered hand impatiently. "Change the subject, do not."

"Fine. You're a Jedi master. Tell me how I can make myself jump."

Yoda gave him a hard stare. "Feel the force."

"But I don't feel it. I just feel scared."

"Defended someone, you did. Someone who needed help. What did you feel then?"

"That just ... happened. I didn't really think about it until I'd done it."

Yoda sat up straighter. His old eyes twinkled. "Yes, young Padawan, this is the way. Think less. Worry less. Trust in yourself, even when scared."

Harper's heart beat faster just picturing himself on one of the bridge's struts, but he knew Yoda was right.

"OK, I'll try, even though there is no 'try'."

From back down the track came the sound of voices. Harper turned to see a mother, leading a grizzly preschooler.

"Quick," Harper said. "You'd better hide before –" But Yoda was gone.

As the bridge came into view, Harper's feet seemed to drum out the words. *Do-or-do-not-do-or-do-not*. He still had no idea which of these options would win out.

Max was waiting, his hair and togs wet. "You took ages," he said.

Harper opened his mouth to explain. *I've been having a chat with Yoda by the toilets. He was wearing an orange sunhat*. But before he could say anything, Max spoke again.

"You know you don't have to jump, right? We can just go swimming – no biggie."

Do or do not. Harper suddenly saw that Max was right. The bridge jump wasn't a test he had to pass. It was a choice, and he was free to make it. A swim would feel amazing.

"See you down there," Harper said. Then he was climbing through the railing on jelly legs. Below him, the last kid to jump was swimming to the side. The deep water waited.

"Feel the ...," Harper heard Max say, but the last word trailed behind him, lost in the dizzying rush of the fall.

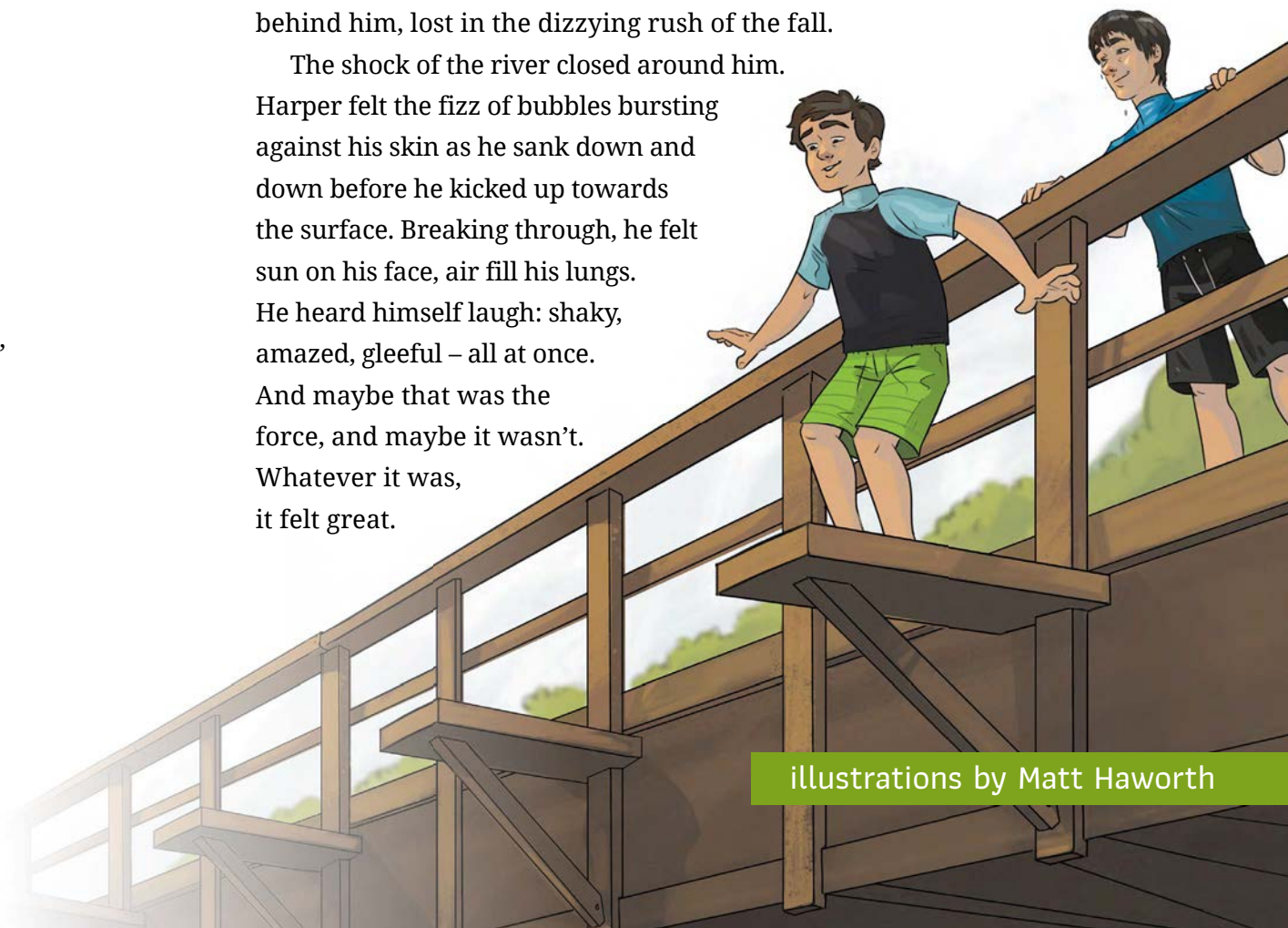
The shock of the river closed around him.

Harper felt the fizz of bubbles bursting against his skin as he sank down and down before he kicked up towards the surface. Breaking through, he felt sun on his face, air fill his lungs. He heard himself laugh: shaky, amazed, gleeful – all at once.

And maybe that was the force, and maybe it wasn't.

Whatever it was,

it felt great.



illustrations by Matt Haworth

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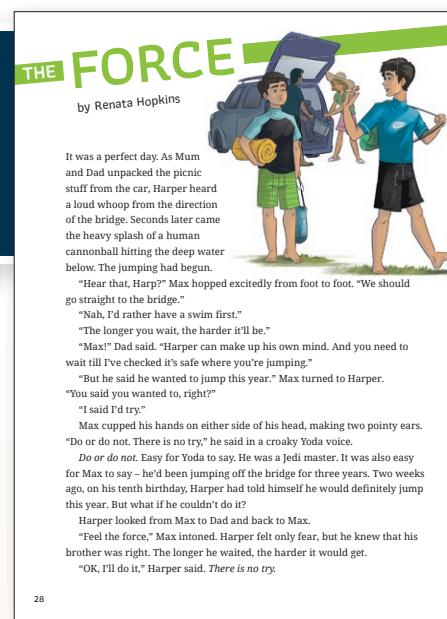
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Published 2018 by the Ministry of Education,
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www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 302 3 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 JUNE 2018

Curriculum learning areas	English Health and Physical Education
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	bullying, courage, family, fantasy, fear, fiction, holidays, imagination, independence, managing self, relating to others, rites of passage, rivers, self-belief, siblings, <i>Star Wars</i> , swimming, Yoda